

Light Breaks

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THE WHOLE VILLAGE was bustling with activity. Nobody was working in the abaca fields. Newly harvested abaca fiber left to dry under the sun hung limp on clotheslines. Children, their skin darkened by prolonged exposure to the sun, ran barefooted, shouting and calling out at each other, pointing at the same direction. Dogs barked threateningly but did not come close to the object of their unease.

"Hurry up, Rolly! The trucks are here!"

Rolly carefully slung his *kudlong* over one shoulder, the length of the stringed instrument almost reaching his calf. He stared at the three huge trucks lined up before the abaca field, their engines running, spurting sounds of impatience; he recognized many of his neighbors clambering up, pushing and shoving for space.

Bold letters announced the ownership on the side of the trucks: "Property of the City Government."

"Hoy, Rolly! *Dali na!*"

His father, already standing beside one of the trucks, called out to him. He was pulling Tiyo Ando who was clutching his *gimbal* up the truck, the small drums making it more difficult for him to climb aboard.

"*Tagad naay, Ama.*" Rolly told his father to wait as he ran back to their *payag* towards the woman standing at the doorway of their small bamboo house.

"Ina . . . ?" He gasped for breath as he stood before his mother, wanting her to take him into her arms.

"Be careful out there in the city, Rolly." Abing held out her hand to the boy. "It is not a safe place. Come home as soon as you can."

"Yes, Ina." Rolly reached out for his mother's hand and pressed it on his forehead. Her hand felt cold against his skin. "We shall bring many things when we come home . . . all nice things and lots of food . . . and money so we can take Ompo to the provincial hospital," he stammered.

Abing tenderly ruffled her son's hair. "I shall be here. Play good music, Rolly. Make the city people see how good you are at playing your *kudlong*. Now go. The trucks are leaving."

Rolly strutted back to the truck. His father reached down and pulled him up. He perched on a bag on the floor. From where he sat, he could see the top of the mountain behind their *payag* where his mother stood at the door waving her hand. It was high noon, and the mountain

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appeared majestic without a hint of cloud marring its façade. As the truck drove away, the mountain seemed to follow them until the nearby trees slowly hid it from their sight.

"This is your first time to come with us, Rolly, no?" Tiyo Ando said.

"Yes, Tiyo," Rolly replied, looking down at the *kudlong*, holding it close. It was his mother's.

"My playing days are over, Rolly," she had said. "Now it is your turn to play beautiful music."

The two strings of the boat-shaped lute seemed to come alive as he gently ran his fingers over them. The notes floated over the din of excited voices. He remembered how his mother would play the instrument during the harvest festivals and how her music would enchant her audience. He remembered how the music took him to a magical world, the world of the spirits, as the leaves of the trees rustled in unison with the sounds of the crickets.

"Tell me, Tiyo, what is the city like?"

"Ahh, the city . . ." Tiyo Ando tapped his *gimbal* as if testing if they still produced sound. "The city, Rolly, is a wild place. Noisy and big, with lots of people who frown and look angry most of the time."

"Hoy, Ando," interrupted Manong Cardo, "don't go scaring my son now. This is his first time to the city."

Rolly looked at his father who was struggling to steady himself as the truck tackled the rocky road downhill. His face was darker now, dripping with sweat as the heat of the sun directly assaulted it. His grim expression betrayed his thoughts. Rolly knew that he too was thinking about Ompo Ikong. It had been days since a strange disease afflicted the old man. Not even the balyan could cure him. The priestess had performed all the rituals and sacrificed three of their prized white chickens. But the old man remained bedridden. A health worker from the *barangay* had advised the family to take the old man to the provincial hospital.

Rolly drew his *kudlong* close. He would play beautiful music, just like his mother. He would play for the city people so they would be enchanted and give him money. He would play for his grandfather.

"*Ciudad na, ciudad na ni!*" The excited cries from their neighbors announcing their arrival in the city jolted Rolly to wakefulness. He had dozed off during the entire trip.

"Come, son. Take a peek at the city." Manong Cardo hoisted his son up. Rolly rubbed his eyes. There were vehicles everywhere, behind them, in front of their truck. They were not moving.

"Why have we stopped, Tay?"

"All vehicles have to wait for those lights to change," replied Manong Cardo. He pointed at the black objects suspended over the wide road. Rolly saw one of the round things blinking.

"See those huge things," Manong Cardo continued. "When they change, the vehicles will start moving again. When the vehicles move, the people stay away and do not cross the streets."

Rolly stared, waiting for the light to change. He then noticed the tall houses that lined the sidewalk. He craned his neck trying to see where one of the tall houses ended. It seemed to reach the sky. His wide eyes couldn't take in all that there was to see. Then he saw a group of young people crossing the street when the light changed. All were staring at them, pointing at them.

"*Nangabut na ang mga netibo!* The natives have arrived," somebody shouted, which triggered laughter from the other people in the sidewalk.

Everyone in the truck was quiet. Rolly heard Tiyo Ando sigh. His father's eyes were downcast, and so were those of the others. Rolly watched as the group reached the other end of the street and lingered as they continued to point fingers at Rolly's truck. Some of them were clapping their hands and laughing. Rolly frowned as he looked them over from his perch on the truck. They wore the same clothes he observed, light-colored shirts, dark pants, and strange-looking footwear that covered the whole feet. He wouldn't be able to walk the fields back home or climb hills wearing those, Rolly thought. They would only restrict his movements. Everyone at home preferred to feel the ground with their feet. It gave them a sense of connection with the spirits. Rolly liked the ticklish sensations he got walking barefooted. He wondered if those city boys wearing the tight-looking footwear had ever

experienced walking shoeless. Rolly then noticed that on their backs were slung bags that appeared to be of the same dark cloth-like material. They seemed filled with things that caused the bags to sag. They looked heavy. He wondered if the bags contained musical instruments. Rolly touched the *kudlong* pressed on his back. He liked the feel of the hardwood on his skin, cool and firm.

"Ama, what is a *netibo*? And why were those people laughing when they called us *netibo*?" Rolly asked his father.

He felt his father put a hand on his head and ruffle his hair gently. "Anak, a *netibo* is one who is born of this land. Our ancestors were born here. They were *netibos*, as we are."

"Those people who were pointing at us and were calling us *netibo* . . . aren't they *netibos*?" Rolly wondered aloud.

"Perhaps not, anak. But we are," his father said.

Then the truck started moving again, at a slower pace this time, until it stopped before a large-roofed structure. One by one, the passengers got off. Most of them had been to the city a number of times. They seemed to know where to go and what to do.

Rolly held tight to his father's hand as they entered the building. He could see the others laying their belongings on the concrete benches.

"We will sleep here," his father said, pointing to a corner and placing their bag on a bench.

"I will stay close to both of you, in case you need advice on how to get around the city," chuckled Tiyo Ando as he carefully lowered his *gimbal*.

"Attention, *mga lumon*," a man in white barong had entered the building. With him was a woman in the same long-sleeved shirt and dark pants.

"Brothers and sisters, welcome to the city again," the man announced. Rolly stared fascinated at the shiny object the man was holding close to his mouth, which made his voice sound louder. "Here with me is Councilor Mabungga, on behalf of our beloved city mayor. Let us welcome her." He clapped his hands and signaled to everyone to do the same.

After a hesitant round of applause from those who were inside the building, the councilor

spoke. "I know you are tired from your trip. But don't worry. The city government has prepared food for all of you as always." She paused and turned to the man, who once again signaled that everyone should clap their hands.

"There is *lugaw*, noodles, and canned sardines for you to partake of. Our mayor and the members of the city council have made preparations for all of you for the whole duration of your stay in our city. You should be thankful." She paused and waited for the applause. "So welcome, *mga kalumon*, and Merry Christmas."

"Sus!" Tiyo Ando muttered. "Always the same speech every year, although from a different mouth." He then pointed with his pursed lips towards the large pots being carried towards the middle of the gym.

"And yes, the same food too," he grumbled, shaking his head. "What made these city people think we can eat nothing but rice broth and canned sardines?"

"Quiet, Ando." Rolly glanced at his father as he admonished Tiyo Ando. His face looked grim. "This is free food. At least it can warm our stomachs after the long trip. Come now, let's line up with the others. Come, Rolly."

Rolly reached for his father's hand as they walked towards the queue. Women wearing the same shirts as the men were handing out steaming bowls of what looked to Rolly like gooey rice topped with a piece of small fish in red sauce. He had never seen nor eaten this kind of food. He thought how bad the city cooks were for adding too much water to rice making it too soft and floating on soup. He thought of how his mother would cook rice or corn grains to perfection. He was hungry and longed for the meals prepared by his mother.

"Here, Rolly." Manong Cardo handed him a bowl. "Be careful. It is still hot."

Rolly accepted the bowl with his two hands. This kind of food cannot be eaten with bare hands, he thought and then sighed.

After Manong Cardo and Tiyo Ando were given their bowls, the three then ambled towards the benches to eat their *lugaw*. Nobody spoke. Each appeared to be contemplating each spoonful of *lugaw*.

After eating, Rolly took his *kudlong* and sat beside his father and Tiyo Ando. The others were likewise engrossed in their own affairs. Many were huddled in groups talking while the rest were already lying down on the mats provided by the city's social workers. Some of the women were trying to put their children to sleep. A couple of babies were crying incessantly.

"Why did they have to bring their babies?" Rolly said, thinking out loud.

"Because city folks are more sympathetic with mothers carrying their children. Although, of course, it is not good for the babies," Tiyo Ando said. "But the mothers will get more money. As with you, Rolly, being a child, you have to perform harder so you will get more money too. Dance while you play your *kudlong*."

"And you better sleep now, Rolly," Manong Cardo pointed to the mat he had prepared for his son. "We will start early tomorrow."

"Yes, indeed," muttered Tiyo Ando, "because the more places we go, the more money we earn."

Despite the sound of traffic beyond the concrete walls of the gymnasium and the whimpering of children inside, Rolly drifted to sleep, a hand resting on top of his *kudlong*. In his sleep, he dreamt he was back home, sitting before his mother while she strummed the strings of her *kudlong*. The breeze seemed to carry the music through the fields, and those who heard it stopped whatever they were doing and listened to it. Many followed the source of the magical sound with their faces aglow until they came where he and his mother sat. Then his mother sang,

There is a tree on the mountain
With beautiful magical leaves
And a bird sat on top of it
And built its nest there
Get me one of his feathers
For me to keep under my pillow
To protect me
Until my last day

His mother's voice blended in harmony with the music from the *kudlong*. He raised his head and gazed at her smiling face. "Soon, you shall play the *kudlong*, anak," she said to Rolly.

"But I can never play as good as you do, Ina," he murmured. "Nobody can."

"Oh, but you will, anak," she replied. "Now, go back to sleep, for tomorrow is a big day. Play good music, Rolly. Make the city people happy." Her words, like the music of the *kudlong*, echoed in his mind. And he slept.

The next day, Rolly woke up disoriented. There were strange noises around him: the wailing of children who didn't get any sleep during the night, people hustling about, blaring sounds from the vehicles outside, the other villagers practicing what sounded like chanting and singing combined, *gimbals* and *kudlongs* being prepared. It took a while for him to realize he was away from home.

"Come now, Rolly. Eat your breakfast, clean up, and put on your festival clothes." Manong Cardo handed him a bowl of lukewarm noodles and water in a plastic cup.

Rolly grabbed the bowl and downed his noodles, then rushed about changing into his festival clothes. The knee-length pants and the unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt made of woven abaca fabric fit him well. His father and Tiyo Ando were wearing something similar. They completed the colorful ensemble with a feathered and beaded headdress. Rolly beamed at his father. He could still remember his mother's words: "Play good music, Rolly. Make the city people happy."

Soon, he was walking the city streets with his father and Tiyo Ando. Rolly didn't mind people staring at them. He was proud of his festival clothes. His mother had woven the abaca fiber and sewn it into a beautiful shirt.

"Now remember always, Rolly," Tiyo Ando warned, "we only cross the street when the lights turn green. When it is red, we stop; when yellow, we wait."

Rolly stared up at the lights. He couldn't tell which was red or green or yellow. He became afraid and moved closer to his father. What if he was left alone in the streets? He wouldn't dare cross.

"You got it all mixed up, Ando," Manong Cardo insisted. "When the light is green, the vehicles go, we stop. When it is red, the vehicles stop, we go. When it is yellow, we all wait."

"These lights are giving me a headache," groaned Tiyo Ando. "Whatever happens, Rolly, stay close, hold on to my hand or your father's, and we'll be okay."

"Yes, Tiyo Ando." Rolly grabbed hold of his father's hand and walked as fast as he could to keep pace.

Their first stop was a bakeshop. Rolly's eyes feasted on the pastries displayed behind glass counters. The smell of freshly baked bread made his mouth water.

"Now, Rolly, you play your *kudlong* while I dance," Manong Cardo instructed. "Ando will play his *gimbal*."

Gingerly, Rolly started to pick on the strings of his *kudlong*.

"You can do better than that, son," Tiyo Ando gently nudged him. "Follow my lead." He started beating his *gimbal*.

Rolly's fingers strummed the strings of his *kudlong*. Slowly, the sound blended with the beat of the *gimbal*. He watched as his father moved his feet to the rhythm. He felt his own feet tapping to the music they were making. Soon, he was dancing with his father and playing his *kudlong*. He felt transported back to his mountain home, to the festivals, where he danced with his mother as she played the *kudlong*. He closed his eyes and felt the music possess him. He danced and danced.

When he opened his eyes, he saw several people surrounding them and staring at him. He looked at his father and Tiyo Ando who had already ceased dancing. They too were watching him. He felt a warm sensation crawling up his cheeks.

"Wow! Beautiful!" a large woman in a flowered dress was approaching him and clapping her big hands. "That was nice, that was nice."

The others around them were starting to clap their hands too.

"Because you did very well and because you made all these people come to our bakeshop, I will give you fifty pesos," the woman handed Rolly the crisp bill. It felt strange in his hand. He immediately handed it to his father.

"And," continued the woman, "a *supot* of freshly baked pandesal."

Rolly eagerly reached for the brown bag, opened it, and breathed in the delicious smell.

They left the bakeshop and scouted for the next stop.

"That was great, what you did there, Rolly." Manong Cardo patted him on the shoulder.

"Yes, indeed, Rolly," agreed Tiyo Ando. "Keep doing that and we will be rich."

They laughed while Rolly munched on his first bun. The bread was soft, almost like his mother's corn cakes, but not as sweet and creamy.

They stopped in front of an establishment that was selling an assortment of dried goods. Rolly stood beside Tiyo Ando and waited for his signal. They then started playing their instruments, and Manong Cardo moved his feet. Rolly noticed some children coming closer and making a circle around them. One of them even imitated Manong Cardo's movements. His playmates urged him to continue. They clapped their hands to the rhythm of the *gimbal*.

"Hoy! Get away from here." A shirtless man in shorts came out of the store waving a rolled newspaper threateningly. "You are making too much noise. Go! We don't have money for you! Istorbo!"

Rolly cringed in fright behind his father. Manong Cardo murmured an apology and dragged both Rolly and Tiyo Ando away.

"Such a bad-tempered man!" Tiyo Ando muttered.

"Hush, Ando. He could still hear you."

They walked on and made five more stops. Two store owners drove them away, while the other three neither drove them away nor welcomed them with applause. They received loose change, a few measly coins for their efforts. By midday, they were exhausted. They decided to rest under the shades of the trees in a park just outside a large white building.

Rolly's attention was drawn to a stone figure perched on top of a narrow platform. The figure looked familiar, and Rolly walked towards it. His eyes widened when he noticed the figure wearing the same clothes that he and the older men were wearing, from the headdress to the accessories around the ankles, the shirt, and the knee-length shorts. The figure was smiling and was holding a large fruit in his outstretched hands as if offering it to all who passed before him.

“Ama, Tiyo!” Rolly blurted excitedly pointing at the statue. “Look, look! He looks just like you! Who is he?”

“That is Datu Bago.” Rolly heard his father’s voice behind him. He had followed him to where he stood before the monument.

“I know Datu Bago,” Rolly exclaimed. “Ompo told us all about him, his story, his deeds, and how a great leader he was of our tribe. But why is this figure that looks like him standing here?”

“To remind people that a long time ago, he was the ruler of a magnificent kingdom and of a brave tribe . . .” Rolly noticed how his father’s voice seemed to falter. He moved closer to gaze at the face of Datu Bago and imagined that the statue was looking down at him and that the smile was for him. He smiled back.

“It has been five years since I started coming to the city every year when the city people celebrate what they call Christmas. The mayor said this is one way of helping us earn some money. And we get to take home gifts from them. But we are not as welcome as they want us to believe.” Tiyo Ando’s words made Rolly turn around and listen to what the older man was saying. He seemed to be mumbling.

“Be quiet, Ando,” Rolly noticed the stern tone in his father’s voice.

“But it is true, Cardo.” Tiyo Ando stood up and paced back and forth. “We come here when the city people celebrate the birth of their god once a year. Why? They take us from our homes in the mountain to come down and entertain them! They want us to think they are generous to us, that they are helping us!” Tiyo Ando squatted on the ground, his hands covering his face.

Manong Cardo stood up and placed his arms over his friend’s shoulders. “Come, Ando, rest for a while.”

“Some of us come here because we were promised gifts, material things, money . . . that we can all take back to our village,” Tiyo Ando stood up. “And we come because we do need these things. We dance for them, we play our music for them, we sing for them . . . we dance, like puppets! And we get ridiculed . . .”

Tiyo Ando’s voice had started to attract passers-by who stopped and stared at the trio

dressed in their traditional clothes.

“*Mga netibo o!*” A woman pointed a finger at them, jeering as she walked past. Rolly remembered the name they were called when they arrived in the city—*mga netibo*. He looked the woman over, noticing her clothes—from her upper garment that was exposing more of the woman’s chest instead of covering it to her very short lower garment and her footwear that made her walk on tiptoe. Rolly blinked in embarrassment. He never saw the women in her village wearing this type of clothing. He imagined how uncomfortable the thin material was, especially in the cold mountain air. And the footwear—he remembered the strange shoes worn by the group of young people who called them *netibo* when they arrived. He thought how painful walking and moving around was for this woman whose shoes were forcing her to walk on tiptoe.

When the woman had gone, a group of boys his age began stomping their feet in imitation of the tribal dance performed by Rolly and his father earlier. One of them even chanted, which caused his companions to break into laughter.

It seemed to Rolly that everyone was laughing at them. He felt ashamed and afraid, but he couldn’t understand why. He looked at his father whose face was turning red. Rolly had never seen his father lose his temper. He gripped Rolly’s hand and pulled Tiyo Ando as they hurriedly left the park. Rolly stared at the two men, unable to comprehend what just happened.

By nightfall, the city came alive with all the colorful lights that adorned the streets and the big buildings. Rolly couldn’t contain his excitement as he took in the sights wide-eyed. Out of exhaustion, they’d stopped performing and were heading back to the covered court.

“Keep close, Rolly!”

“Yes, Ama!”

Rolly’s eyes were drawn to a huge lighted object outside a building. It stood tall and bright, and there was a large star on top of it. It reminded him of their mountain back home, when the sun set behind it. It would always seem to Rolly that before it would finally descend, the sun would hover awhile for a brief conversation with the mountain, perhaps bidding goodbye for the day.

“Cardo!”

There was a loud crash, the sound of something big and hard hitting something smaller and solid. It sounded like a crack of thunder. Then an eerie silence followed. The loud screaming jolted Rolly. He switched his gaze from the lighted object towards where the commotion was, in the middle of the street. He suddenly felt very afraid.

“Ama! Ama!” He ran to the spot where the sound, like a loud crack of thunder, fell.

The backs of people were blocking his view. He couldn’t find his father and Tiyo Ando. His fear intensified. He felt cold.

“Ama! Ama!” He began to cry, feeling alone in a strange place.

Then he saw a vehicle that looked like the one that had carried them to the city. It was in the middle of the street in full stop. The other vehicles were not moving too. Rolly looked up at the lights suspended over the street. The middle light was blinking. What did Tiyo Ando say about the middle light? It said wait, everyone was supposed to wait. Everyone was waiting now.

“Ama! Ama! . . . Tiyo Ando . . .”

Rolly forced his way through the crowd. Then he saw the body of a man lying under the truck, between its huge wheels. There was blood all over. A man was standing over the body, explaining something to another man squatting beside it.

“The light was green. I . . . I didn’t think he would cross . . . it was so sudden . . . I’m so sorry . . .”

Rolly froze, then he screamed, “Ama! Ama!”

He ran to the middle of the street, unmindful of the shocked warnings from the crowd. Then he stumbled on something that rolled away. He stopped. The *gimbal*.

“Rolly!” Manong Cardo stood up and rushed to his son, taking the boy in his arms.

“Ama! Ama! . . . I thought . . .”

“Your Tiyo Ando . . . he only had enough time to call out my name.” He held Rolly close. “I couldn’t get to him fast enough.”

“Manong, you better go to the sidewalk now.” A man in white tapped Cardo’s shoulder lightly. “We will take care of this.”

“He is my friend . . .” Manong Cardo murmured. “I have to stay with him.”

“There’s nothing you can do now, Manong,” the ambulance attendant said firmly. “Take your son to the sidewalk where both of you will be safer.”

Manong Cardo walked away from the middle of the street, carrying Rolly, who was still sobbing and tightly holding on to him.

“Ama . . . Tiyo Ando’s *gimbal*. We must take it with us.”

Manong Cardo picked up the instrument and hugged it close with his other arm. Rolly wiped his tears with the back of his hand. He noticed the lights overhead blinking still, and the tall object with a star on top of it was now a blur of colors. He felt for his *kudlong* and touched the *gimbal*. He stiffened and, with a muffled sob, buried his head in his father’s chest. He couldn’t look back. He shut his eyes wanting to block the sight, but his closed eyelids could not keep out the blinking lights from the huge artificial tree and the lights that hung overhead.